

THE BATTLE OF LAKE ERIE

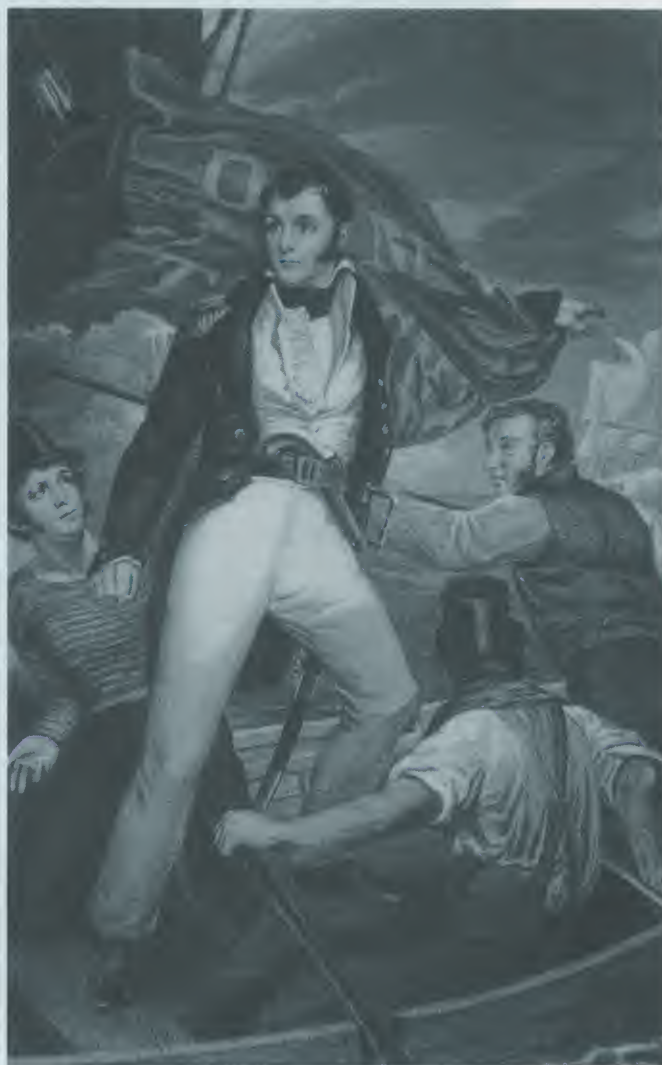
by Walter Rybka
Captain, U.S. Brig *Niagara*

The United States declared war on Great Britain June 18, 1812, after years of strained relations caused by territorial competition between the two countries over the old Northwest Territory around the Great Lakes, and Britain's impressment of American sailors during its war with Napoleon. The Royal Navy, chronically short of experienced seamen, seized men serving in ships of other countries, including America.

At the same time both Britain and France were blockading neutral shipping, leading to demands for "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights." Meanwhile, many Americans, primarily from the south and west, were pushing to extend settlement westward into the new Louisiana Territory and northward into Canada. In Congress the "War Hawks" led by Henry Clay agitated for war with Great Britain and invasion and acquisition of Canada.

Having declared war, the United States quickly discovered that it was ill prepared for military action. Invasions of Canada at Detroit, Niagara Falls, and Montreal were quickly repulsed by the British. Meanwhile, British forces seized Fort Dearborn (Chicago), Mackinac, and Detroit, gaining control of the upper Great Lakes and endangering the security of the Northwest Territory.

In response, President James Madison ordered construction of a naval fleet to regain control of Lake Erie. Daniel Dobbins, an experienced shipmaster from Erie was ordered to build four schooner-rigged gunboats at Erie on Presque Isle Bay, the only protected harbor on the south coast of Lake Erie. Dobbins established the construction sites in late 1812, hired workers, procured materials, and began construction of the four gunboats. On December 31, 1812, the commander of the U.S. Navy on the Great Lakes, Commodore Isaac Chauncey, visited Erie and ordered modifications to two of the gunboats and construction of a 20-gun brig. Later a second brig was ordered. In early March 1813 an experienced New York shipbuilder, Noah Brown, took charge of building the



Commodore Perry transferring from the Lawrence to the Niagara during the battle. From a painting by John Wesley Jarvis. Beverly R. Robinson Collection, United States Naval Academy.

fleet. Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry arrived from Rhode Island soon after to command the squadron.

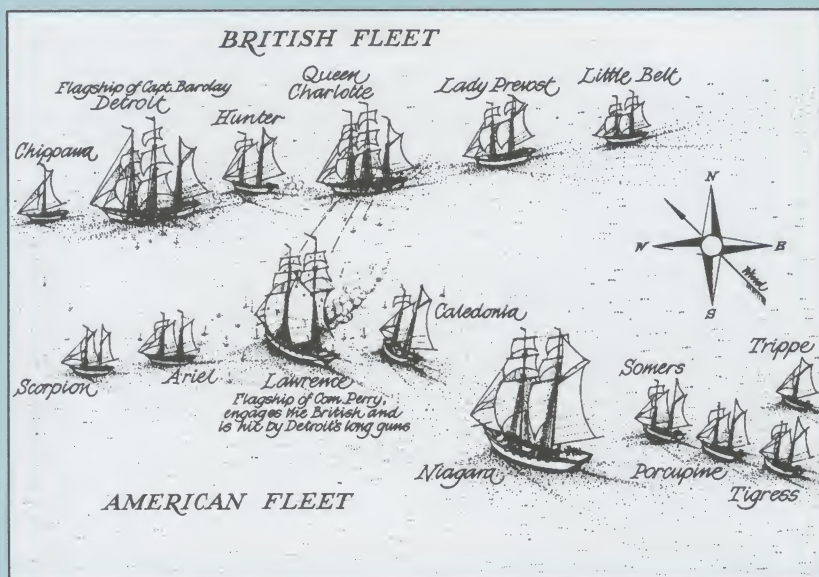
Spring might bring a British attack, so the need for speed was paramount. Although timber was readily available in unlimited quantity, iron for fastenings, rope, sailcloth, cannon, and ammunition all had to be transported hundreds of miles to reach the fleet. The naval war on the Great Lakes has been called the "shipwrights' war"—dependent upon the skill and speed of the builders before any battles could be fought.

While Erie had Presque Isle peninsula to shelter the harbor, the sand bar at its mouth had, at best, no more than six feet of water over it. Therefore, the brigs had to be built with the shallowest draft possible. They still needed to be lightened and lifted over the bar with camels (barges which could be secured alongside, partially flooded, and then pumped out to lift the ship).

In June 1813, after British forces were driven back from the Niagara River near Buffalo, Commodore Perry sailed five converted merchant vessels from Black Rock near Buffalo, to Erie to augment the fleet. On arrival, four were added to the squadron which then comprised the new 20-gun brigs *Lawrence* and *Niagara*, the smaller brig *Caledonia*, schooners *Ariel*, *Porcupine*, *Scorpion*, *Somers*, and *Tigress*, sloop *Trippe* and supply schooner *Ohio*.

Due to the bar, the British ships could not enter Erie harbor while the American fleet was still under construction. The British fleet kept up an active blockade throughout the spring and summer but on July 31 unexpectedly returned to Canada, possibly to resupply. Taking advantage of this, beginning on August 1, Perry moved his fleet over the bar. The two brigs, *Lawrence* and *Niagara*, had to be floated over the bar without their cannon. The British reappeared before the brigs could be rearmed but did not realize that their adversaries were temporarily defenseless. Faced with the larger American fleet, the British retired to Fort Malden (Amherstburg), near present-day Windsor, Ontario.

Perry meanwhile took his new squadron on a shake-down cruise across the lake to Long Point in Canada in an unsuccessful search for the British squadron, then returned to Erie where a large contingent of sailors led by Master Commandant Jesse D. Elliott joined the squadron. Perry finally had barely adequate crews to sail all ten ships. Later, Major General William Henry Harrison provided additional soldiers to help man the guns. Thus, there was a core of experienced sailors augmented by civilian recruits, volunteers from state militias and soldiers of the U.S. Army. While not widely recognized until recently, a significant number (possibly upwards of 20 percent) of Navy enlisted personnel were African American. In fact, African Americans were routinely recruited and served in most ships of the Navy in the early nineteenth century.

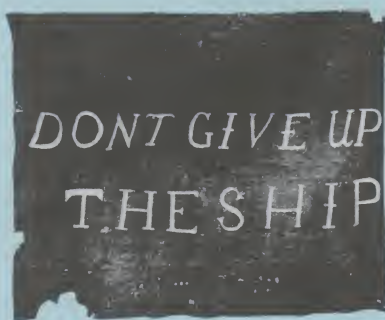


The Battle of Lake Erie: 12:15 P.M.

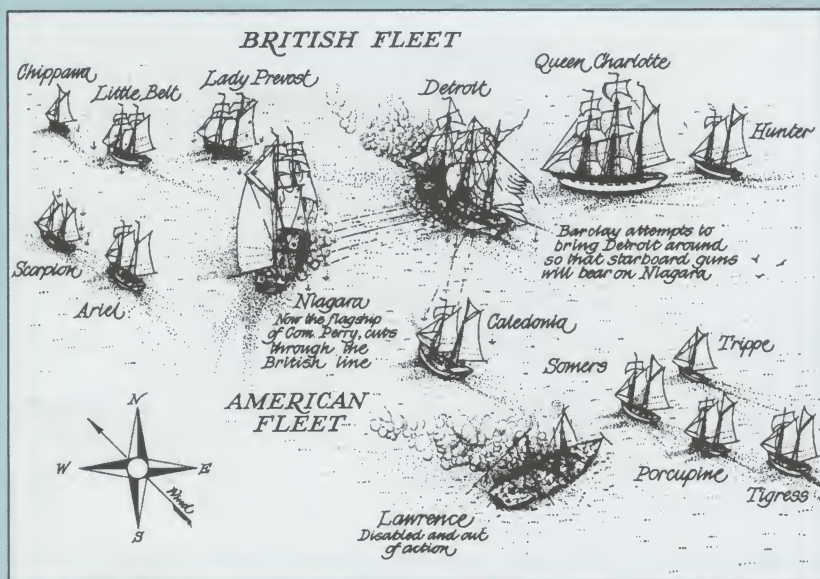
Finally, in early August the squadron sailed to western Lake Erie where Perry established a forward base at Put-in-Bay in the Bass Islands, from which he could observe the British squadron at Fort Malden. The British, under Captain Robert H. Barclay, were rushing to complete their largest ship, *Detroit*. Her completion in early September gave the British six vessels: the flagship *Detroit*, ship *Queen Charlotte*, brig *Hunter*, schooners *Lady Prevost* and *Chippawa*, and sloop *Little Belt*.

The navigation season was now far advanced, and the British either had to resupply or be forced to retreat from Detroit and southern Ontario. However, supply ships could not get through until the U.S. squadron had been defeated. Barclay needed to fight the battle as soon as possible, even though he had even fewer experienced men than Perry. His position was truly desperate—the Indian allies were ready to desert Fort Malden, and the British troops without a victory would be forced to retreat. If Barclay were to wait, either the weather or the empty stomachs of his men would be sure to defeat him.

At dawn on September 10, Barclay's squadron was sighted as it approached Put-in-Bay. Within minutes the U.S. squadron was making sail and weighing anchor to meet it. Initially, the wind was from the southwest, and Perry's ships spent some time tacking (maneuvering) back and forth between Rattlesnake Island and South Bass Island trying to sail into the open lake.



Commodore Perry's battle flag. United States Naval Academy.

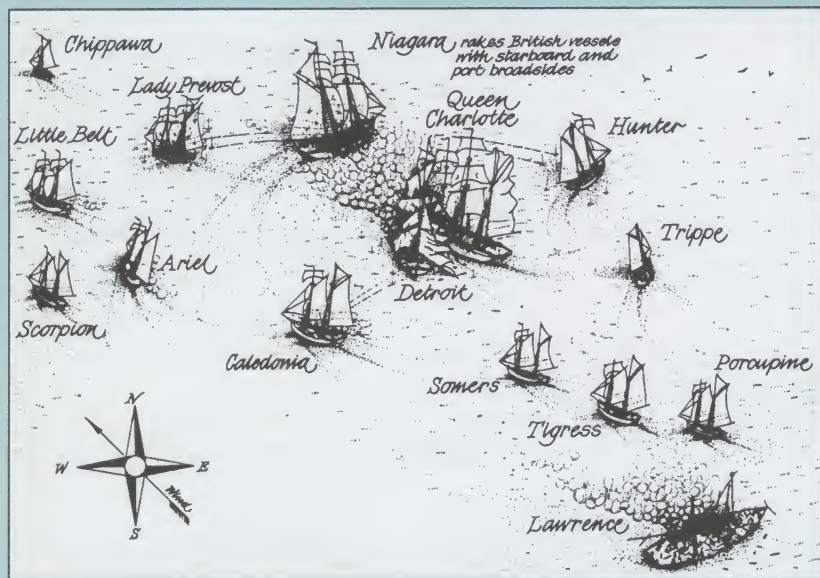


The Battle of Lake Erie: 2:40 P.M.

Above, left, and below illustrations by Geoffrey Matthews.

Perry had just ordered the ships to run to leeward of Ratlesnake Island when the wind shifted and began to blow from a more southerly direction, enabling them to keep to weather (windward) of Barclay.

Barclay turned and formed his line on the port tack (wind from the port side), heading west. This gave him more sea room and would keep Perry from getting between him and his base. Perry also formed a line on port tack and sailed toward the British ships. His own line was planned to position his two largest ships, *Lawrence* and *Niagara*, against Barclay's two biggest, *Detroit* and *Queen-Charlotte*.



The Battle of Lake Erie: 3:00 P.M.

The U.S. fleet numbered nine vessels to the British six, but nearly all the power of both fleets was in their two largest ships, the rest of the vessels having only a few guns each. In the number of guns, the two fleets were fairly evenly matched. However, the heavier weight of shot of the short-range U.S. carronades gave Perry a great advantage in close-range gunnery. The broadside weights were about one-third more than the British. In terms of manning, the U.S. had an even more significant advantage. While the American fleet had fewer men than the design complement—between 532 and 600 men—Barclay had only 440. Nearly two hundred of Perry's men were naval personnel, while scarcely fifty of Barclay's were Royal Navy. The odds very much favored the U.S.

Before the battle, Perry hoisted his personal flag, inscribed with the motto "Don't Give Up the Ship," the dying words of Capt. James Lawrence, who as commander of the U.S. Frigate *Chesapeake* had been mortally wounded earlier that year. Perry's flagship was named in his honor. *Niagara* was named for a recent land victory near Niagara Falls.

Initially, the British had the advantage of their long-range guns which outranged Perry's short-range carronades, but Perry could throw a heavier broadside once within range. The British did a good job of station keeping; their compact line made for mutual support, but this is also simpler to do when awaiting attack from the lee gage (downwind) position. The wind was now from the southeast, although extremely light; and Perry was sailing downwind toward the British. This forced him to present his bows to the enemy and endure fire before his broadside could be brought to bear. If Perry had slowed his lead ships to wait for the others to close up, he would have prolonged his exposure to the long-range fire that was beyond the range of his own guns to answer.

Perry's orders to his ships were to stay near the *Lawrence*, close to the enemy; and sail in line. For reasons never fully explained, Master Commandant Jesse D. Elliott, commanding *Niagara*, kept the brig back, nearly out of range. Elliott's defense was that his orders were to keep station behind *Caledonia*, a small brig in between *Lawrence* and *Niagara* that proved very slow, but he thereby failed to support the Commander and close with the enemy.

The battle opened at 11:45, when a British 24-lb. ball struck the *Lawrence*. The light breeze



Perry's Victory on Lake Erie by Thomas Birch. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

meant the ships were moving so slowly that it would take Perry the next forty-five minutes to close from about a mile down to the two hundred-yard range at which the carronades would be most lethal. During all this time *Lawrence* continued to receive fire she could not answer except with two long 12 pounders. By 12:30 Perry was able to open fire in earnest. He found himself under fire, however, from both large British ships, *Detroit* and *Queen Charlotte*, and from the brig *Hunter* as well.

For the next two hours *Lawrence* fought an artillery duel on very uneven terms. While her 32-lb. carronades were inflicting great damage on the British, the combined firepower of *Detroit*, *Hunter*, and *Queen Charlotte* eventually put all of *Lawrence*'s guns on the engaged side out of action. Eighty percent of the men fit for duty on *Lawrence* were casualties, twenty-two killed and sixty-six wounded, a proportional toll seldom exceeded in the age of sail.

Perry had the great good luck to remain uninjured while his ship became a shattered slaughterhouse around

him. With both guns and crew gone, there was nothing more that could be accomplished from the *Lawrence*. Perry had the further good fortune that one of the ship's boats being towed astern was still intact.

Seeing that *Niagara* was still undamaged, Perry was determined to continue the fight from her. The irony is that the only way to continue the fight was to haul down the "Don't Give Up The Ship" flag and to do just that. Perry turned over *Lawrence* to Lieutenant Yarnall, who later surrendered to avoid further useless slaughter. However, the British were unable to put anyone aboard to take her as a prize because all of their boats had been destroyed. Perry's amazing luck held as he successfully made the transfer to *Niagara* under a storm of British fire. There Perry had a short, grim meeting with Elliott. Predictably, accounts differ as to the words exchanged. Elliott apparently suggested, and Perry agreed, that Elliott should go off in the boat to encourage the smaller vessels to close up. Immediately after Elliott's departure, Perry proceeded to sail the fresh *Nia-*

gara into the British line to closely engage.

By this time, 2:40, due to the hard fight *Lawrence* had put up, all the senior officers on both *Detroit* and *Queen Charlotte* were either dead or incapacitated. Many of the guns on their port sides were dismounted. The rigging had been badly shot up as well, rendering the ships all but uncontrollable. The junior officer in charge of *Detroit*, on seeing the *Niagara* bearing down, struggled to turn the ship and present his undamaged starboard battery. *Queen Charlotte* attempted the same maneuver but bore off (turned) too slowly and became fouled in *Detroit*'s mizzen mast rigging, locking the two ships helplessly together, unable to maneuver.

Perry's good fortune had been crowned by this British catastrophe. *Niagara*'s starboard broadsides ripped down the length of the already battered vessels while her port broadsides wreaked havoc on the *Lady Prevost*. Within fifteen minutes of his transfer to the *Niagara*, the British had surrendered.

Perry returned to the *Lawrence* to receive the British surrender, and penned his famous message to General Harrison:

We have met the enemy and they are ours:
Two Ships, two Brigs one Schooner & one Sloop.
Yours, with great respect and esteem

O.H. Perry.

After the battle all ships anchored, and the survivors turned to clearing away the wreckage, tending the wounded, and burying the dead. The enlisted men were

buried at sea that night, and the officers from both sides were buried together on South Bass Island the next day when all the ships returned to Put-in-Bay.

The Battle of Lake Erie marked the first time the U.S. Navy had fought a decisive fleet action. Its complete inexperience in this tactical situation may explain some of the difficulty in getting all ships engaged. This also marked the first time a British fleet, however small, had been forced to surrender en masse. Forced by circumstance to seek battle ill prepared and outgunned, the British received a serious blow to their pride. In the United States, national morale was greatly improved.

The battle left the U.S. in complete control of Lake Erie, and eliminated any chance of the British resupplying their garrison at Detroit, forcing them to abandon it and retreat to the east. Perry, meanwhile, used the combined fleet to transport Major General Harrison's army to the north shore of Lake Erie, where it intercepted the retreating British army and defeated it at the Battle of the Thames River (Moraviantown) on October 5, 1813. It was during this battle that the great

Indian chief Tecumseh was killed. His death, and disillusionment with the British, led to the collapse of the Indian confederacy's alliance with the British. The British were never able to reestablish their power in the West, and the United States was able to secure its northern frontier.



The reconstructed U.S. Brig Niagara was commissioned as the "Flagship of Pennsylvania" in 1990 and is administered by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Based in Erie, the Niagara serves as a sailing goodwill ambassador and provides "living history" training in seamanship. Photo courtesy of Flagship Niagara League.

FOR FURTHER READING

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